

Habakkuk 3:8-15

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/hab/hab-3/habakkuk-38-15/>

Habakkuk wants to know the ultimate purpose of the LORD's manifest presence. The prophet then realizes that the LORD's appearance is to deliver His covenant people from their adversaries.

In the previous section, Habakkuk described the great miracles that the LORD had performed (vv. 3-7). In the present section, he addressed God directly through some questions. He began by addressing God in the third person, then switched to the second person. In so doing, he engaged in a personal conversation with God to find an explanation of the divine phenomenon of the past.

*Did the Lord rage against the rivers,
Or was Your anger against the rivers,
Or was Your wrath against the sea,
That You rode on Your horses,
On Your chariots of salvation?
Your bow was made bare,
The rods of chastisement were sworn.*

The prophet issued three rhetorical questions.

- *Did the LORD rage against the rivers or*
- *was Your anger against the rivers, or*
- *was Your wrath against the sea?*

In each case, the question is connected to God's action *That you rode on Your horses, On your chariots of salvation?*

To determine what *salvation* Habakkuk is referring to, who is being delivered from what, we can look at the last line of this verse of the psalm, noting that *Your bow was made bare, The rods of chastisement were sworn.*

So the context of this stanza, verses 8 through 9a, has to do with *rods of chastisement*. *Rods of chastisement* speaks of God's divine discipline upon evil. In the previous chapters, both Judah as well as Babylon were prophesied to undergo God's *chastisement* for their evil deeds. In the case of Judah, its chastisement and exile to Babylon was to provide it *salvation* from its adopted practice of evil, and cause it to return to God (Jeremiah 29:11). In the case of the fall of Babylon, that led to Judah's return from exile, under the Persian king Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-4). In this way Judah gained *salvation* from exile.

It is not clear whether the rhetorical questions of whether God's anger raged against the *rivers* and *sea* expects a yes or no answer. If "no" it could be that the psalm is pointing out that the

physical destruction of the earth was merely collateral damage for a much larger cause —the divine discipline of God, the *rods of chastisement*.

If “yes” it could be that the reference to the *rivers* and *sea* allude to pagan deities. In this case, God’s *rods of chastisement* might refer to the evil adopted by Judah and perpetrated by Babylon. Both would be judged severely.

That God *rode on your horses* might refer to the human agents God appointed to do His bidding. In the case of the *rods of chastisement* upon Judah, God used the *horses* that were the armies of Babylon. In the case of the *rods of chastisement* upon Babylon, God used the *horses* that were the armies of the Medes and Persians (Daniel 5:30-31).

Habakkuk switched from the general term for God (Eloah in verse 3) to Yahweh, the covenant/treaty name of God. The switch highlights God’s relationship with the people of Judah. Also, it recalls God’s holiness, eternity, and faithful promises made to Abraham, Judah’s forefather (Genesis 12:1-3).

As mentioned, God’s anger here might be being expressed against Canaanite deities. The phrase *against the sea* translates the Hebrew word “Yam” which was the name of a Canaanite deity. The Canaanites deified bodies of water. So this could express that God was going to overthrow the local spiritual forces, which perhaps were still being worshipped. If this is the case, then the rhetorical question would expect an affirmative answer.

The word *salvation* is “Jeshuah” in Hebrew. The Hebrew name “Joshua” derives from this word. (Jesus is the Greek version of Joshua). Sometimes, it refers to an eternal and spiritual deliverance (Acts 16:30–31). In such a case, it speaks of deliverance from being separated from God (Romans 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:9).

But much of the time the noun *salvation* means deliverance from something else, such as danger or suffering, both in Hebrew as well as Greek (Philippians 1:19). In fact, the Greek verb “sozo,” most often translated “saved,” is sometimes translated “healed” when the context refers to someone being delivered from sickness (see Mark 5:23, where “sozo” is translated “get well”).

The Greek translation of Habakkuk translates from Hebrew to Greek the word most often translated to English as “salvation” in verse 13. The meaning intended here likely emphasizes the kind of deliverance that God provided Israel when they exited from Egypt. Accordingly, this passage looks forward to the time when God will defeat the enemies of Israel, Babylon in particular. However, it could also apply to Judah’s exile, which would save them from sinking further into injustice (Habakkuk 1:2-4).

Habakkuk spoke of the deliverance of the people of Judah from their enemies. The *LORD* would ride on His *chariots* to rescue His covenant people. This predicts that God will restore His people from exile. This is also a part of God’s covenant promise, that when the people break the covenant/treaty, and endure the provisions of cursing, and endure His *rods of chastisement*, God will still remember them and restore them, because of His love for them (Deuteronomy 32:43).

Chariots were two-wheeled carts pulled by two horses and used in ancient warfare and racing. They were a mobile platform allowing soldiers to shoot volleys of arrows to soften up the foot of their foes (Nahum 2:4). Together with *horses*, *chariots* symbolize God's power and strength as He *rode* forward to strike His adversaries and deliver His covenant people.

Habakkuk continued to describe the LORD's activity with the picture of a warrior armed with various weapons. In verse 9, he stated, *Your bow was made bare*. The *bow* was a primary instrument in war. It is used in a figurative way here to symbolize power, warfare, and sovereignty. The all-powerful God removed or *made bare* His *bow* from its protective cover or sheath, in preparation to string it and let arrows begin to fly. This picture shows that God was ready to begin the battle against His adversaries, also the adversaries of His people. This picture is one of hope for Judah/Israel. Though Babylon will soon swoop in to lead Judah captive, God will be faithful to honor His promise to redeem His people once they have been chastised per the terms of His covenant with them (Deuteronomy 32:36).

This is because *the rods of chastisement were sworn*. Judah would surely go into exile, which was their chastisement for breaking their obligations under the Suzerain-Vassal style covenant they had agreed to enter into with Yahweh (Exodus 19:8; Deuteronomy 28:25). But God had promised to fight for His covenant people to give them victory over their enemy in due time, and chastise them for their malice toward His people (Habakkuk 2:7-8; Deuteronomy 32:39-43). Just as the exile was certain, so is God's restoration of Israel certain. This pictures God already being ready to fulfill His words, even before Judah's imminent fall to Babylon.

The term *selah* occurs again in the middle of the verse (Habakkuk 3:3). As a musical term, *selah* may call the singers or musicians who performed the song to pause to reflect on the promise of the *LORD* taking His *bow* to avenge the blood of His covenant people (Deuteronomy 32:43). After the word *selah*, Habakkuk resumed his speech and said to God, *You cleaved the earth with rivers*. That means that the *LORD*'s power and strength caused the *rivers* to split the *earth* as they broke out (Psalm 77:16). If God controls the rivers, then He can surely bring this promise to pass.

Habakkuk went further to say, *The mountains saw You and quaked*. The verb translated as *quaked* ("chîl" in Hebrew) means to be in labor or to be in pain, as when a woman is about to give birth to a child (Isaiah 13:8; 26:17; Jeremiah 4:31). In Habakkuk, the subject of the verb is *mountains*.

Although *mountains* symbolize stability and immovability, they cannot withstand the *LORD*'s power. When the *mountains saw* Him, they trembled (Nahum 1:5). In the previous section, "the mountains were shattered" (v. 6). Now in the *LORD*'s presence, they writhed like a woman in childbirth.

Perhaps the text of Habakkuk reminds the reader of the Exodus account in which Mount Sinai quaked when the *LORD* visited it and appeared to Moses: "Now Mount Sinai *was* all in smoke because the *Lord* descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently" (Exodus 19:18). If the mountains quake in the

presence of God, then He has the power to bring about the restoration of Israel after it is demolished by Babylon.

In addition to the movement of the *mountains, the downpour of waters swept by*, causing the flood to overwhelm the surface of the land. Also, *the deep uttered forth its voice*. The term *deep* is “tehom” in the Hebrew text. It refers to the oceans and/or *waters* under the earth. The term occurs in Genesis 1, where it describes the elements that characterize the state of the world before creation: “and darkness was over the surface of the deep” (Genesis 1:2).

Here in Habakkuk, the *deep* made a roaring sound. *It lifted high its hands*. The *hands of the deep* refer to its waves. That means that its waves moved violently but in vain because the *LORD* would overcome them (Psalm 77:16-17). If the Lord has this sort of power over nature, then He can surely raise up Judah again after its conquest by Babylon. Habakkuk 3:9b-10 might evoke for the reader an image of Noah’s flood, which destroyed the earth at that time (2 Peter 3:6). God judged the world with a flood because it had filled with violence (Genesis 6:13). It is certain that God will also judge the nations who imposed violence upon His people.

Not only did the LORD’s power affect nature, but it also affected the heavenly bodies. Indeed, the *sun and moon stood in their places*. They discontinued their constant orbit, as they had done in the days of Joshua (Joshua 10:12-14). This might invoke the image of the day when God fought for Israel by making the sun and moon stand still. So will God fight for His people against His enemies in the future.

Then, they *went away at the light of Your arrows, at the radiance of Your gleaming spear*. The Hebrew term translated *went away* indicates movement. This likely means that they resumed their work at the LORD’s command, at the *light of Your arrows* and at the *radiance of Your gleaming spear*. God’s *arrows* and *spears* ^{3/4}two weapons commonly used in ancient Near Eastern warfare^{3/4} caused the *sun and moon* to resume their course. If God has the power to cause the heavenly bodies to stop then resume, then He certainly has the power to restore Judah after its demise by the Chaldeans. Habakkuk was understandably distressed when he learned that Judah was to be destroyed by the Babylonians. Now he exalts the LORD in this psalm because He has promised redemption, that Judah will rise from the ashes.

The power of the LORD is irresistible. It would ultimately defeat the foreign nations, although in the short run these nations will defeat and subjugate Judah. The prophet explained, *In indignation You marched through the earth; In anger You trampled the nations*. These *nations* that trouble Judah will in turn be troubled by God. It is notable here that the text refers to *nations* rather than just referring to Babylon. This predicts that other nations will join in the persecution of the Jews; all these nations will be brought to account.

The verb translated as *trampled* means “to thresh.” For example, the book of Deuteronomy forbade the Israelites from muzzling the ox while he was threshing the grain, so that he could consume it without hindrance, and have ample energy to do his work (Deuteronomy 25:4). Here in Habakkuk, it is Yahweh who *trampled* the foreign nations *in His anger*, as an ox would trample out the wheat. But what was the purpose of this divine intervention?

God's anger shook the *rivers* and the *sea*, because God was displeased with the foreign nations. This might foresee that God will use nature in His judgement of the *nations* (Revelation 6:12-14).

In verse 13, Habakkuk switches his focus from nature to people and said, *You went forth for the salvation of Your people, for the salvation of Your anointed*. The people of God are called His *anointed*. The term *anointed* refers to someone who is chosen by God for a special purpose. The Old Testament describes the following kings as being "anointed": Saul (1 Samuel 9:16), David (1 Samuel 16:3), Absalom (2 Samuel 19:11), Solomon (1 Kings 1:34; 1 Chronicles 29:22), Jehu (1 Kings 19:16), Joash (2 Kings 11:12), Jehoahaz (2 Kings 23:30), and Hazael of Damascus (1 Kings 19:15).

The term *salvation of your anointed* can be connected in Hebrew to Yeshua Mashiah, which in English could be rendered "Jesus, Messiah." So in addition to a prophetic expectation of Judah/Israel's physical restoration, this could also predict Israel's spiritual restoration through Jesus the Christ, which is to say "Jesus the Anointed One." In this, the salvation of the nations would also be embedded, in fulfillment of God's promise that in Him all nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:3; John 3:16).

Here in Habakkuk, the people of Judah and Israel were the *anointed* ones because God chose them to be His treasured possession. They were to be to Him a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5). Thus, God will go out to save His chosen ones by destroying their adversaries.

That Habakkuk describes a future event in the past tense shows the certainty of the prediction: *In indignation You marched through the earth; In anger You trampled the nations*. The future event is so certain that it is spoken of as if it has already occurred. This certainty of restoration is of great importance given the dire nature of Habakkuk's prediction of Judah's looming fall to Babylon (Habakkuk 1:6).

Habakkuk continues to speak of future events in past tense, saying, *You struck the head of the house of the evil*. The phrase *head of the house* refers to the leader of the *nations*. Since the enemy leader was against God and His chosen people, God *struck* his *head to lay him open from thigh to neck*. That is a graphic picture that makes clear that God *struck* down the leader of the wicked nation(s) and destroyed him. Speaking of future events in past tense show the certainty that what God has spoken will surely come to pass.

Some Jewish tradition says this leader who is the *head of the house* is the King of Assyria, who is a type of the antichrist. There are many types of the antichrist, and they are often pictured as being slain by a headwound. This would include the predicted Messiah crushing the head of the serpent in Genesis 3:15 and the slaying of Goliath (1 Samuel 17:49). Also, the Beast of Revelation appears to resurrect from a headwound, only to later be thrown directly into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 13:3, 19:20). Micah 5:5 might predict that this Beast of Revelation will be an Assyrian, which would tie with Jewish tradition.

For the third time in the psalm, Habakkuk inserted the word *selah*, perhaps inviting the singers or musicians who performed the song to pause to reflect on the grandeur of the LORD who *struck* the enemy nation and rescued His covenant people. After the term *selah*, Habakkuk continued to describe the certain eventual defeat of God's adversaries while addressing God directly, saying, *You pierced with his own spears the head of his throngs*. This is still speaking of God's destruction of the *head of the house*, which might be a picture of the antichrist who will rule the nations in the last days.

The verb translated as *pierce* means to strike a hole, usually with a sharp-pointed object. For example, "Jehoiada the priest took a chest and bored a hole in its lid and put it beside the altar, on the right side as one comes into the house of the Lord; and the priests who guarded the threshold put in it all the money which was brought into the house of the Lord" (2 Kings 12:9). In Habakkuk, it is Yahweh who performed that action. He *pierced the head of his throngs with his own spears*. This is another way of saying that God used the enemy's own weapons to attack and defeat him. This picture of a spear penetrating a skull is another graphic illustration showing that the complete defeat of Israel's enemies is certain.

Still speaking of future events in past tense, Habakkuk notes that the adversary plotted evil against the LORD and His covenant people. The prophet Habakkuk said, *They stormed in to scatter us*. That is, the enemy soldiers came like a storm to throw the people of God in various random directions so that they might become weak and powerless. This could describe the looming Babylonian invasion God has disclosed to Habakkuk (Habakkuk 1:5).

Given that verse 12 speaks of a plurality of *nations*, this could include other future oppressors of Israel as well. It could refer to the nations who will gather in the Valley of Megiddo (Armageddon) for the last assault on Jerusalem before they are destroyed (Revelation 16:14-16; Zechariah 14:2; Zechariah 14:3-7).

And, *the enemy's exultation was like those who devour the oppressed in secret*. The idea here seems to indicate that the enemy of God's people are like those who oppress *in secret*, which feeds their lust for exploitation, while outwardly maintaining a façade of respectability.

The word *oppressed* in the phrase *those who devour the oppressed in secret* speaks of the injustice done upon those in need. The less fortunate in society are often the ones who suffer from social injustice and mistreatment (Amos 4:1; 8:4). In our passage, the enemy soldiers rejoiced over abuse of God's people like those who secretly devour poor people, outwardly pretending to do them good while actually exploiting them. They expected victory for themselves, but the LORD would turn the table on them to defeat them all. The punishment would fit the crime.

Habakkuk closed this section by returning to the theme of nature begun in verse 9 and interrupted in verse 13. He declared, *You trampled on the sea with Your horses, on the surge of many waters*. This verse might allude to the crossing of the Red Sea in a great deliverance of His people (Exodus 14:21-29; 15:10). God marched triumphantly over the surging waters of the great sea. His purpose was to deliver His oppressed people. God alone is victorious. He is the great

warrior, the one who never loses any battle. The predicted future deliverance, spoken of in past tense, is just as certain as God's past deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

The term *many waters* might also picture the nations covering the earth, as the waters of Noah's flood covered the earth, and filled it with violence (Genesis 6:11). Just as Noah's ark delivered all who believed from the flood, Jesus has rescued all who believe from the flood of sin (Colossians 2:14). Just as the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat and the earth was renewed, Jesus will come to rest on the Mount of Olives and renew the earth (Zechariah 14:4).

Biblical Text

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Or *was* Your anger against the rivers,
Or *was* Your wrath against the sea,
That You rode on Your horses,
On Your chariots of salvation?**

**⁹ Your bow was made bare,
The rods of chastisement were sworn. *Selah*.
You cleaved the earth with rivers.**

**¹⁰ The mountains saw You *and* quaked;
The downpour of waters swept by.
The deep uttered forth its voice,
It lifted high its hands.**

**¹¹ Sun *and* moon stood in their places;
They went away at the light of Your arrows,
At the radiance of Your gleaming spear.**

**¹² In indignation You marched through the earth;
In anger You trampled the nations.**

**¹³ You went forth for the salvation of Your people,
For the salvation of Your anointed.
You struck the head of the house of the evil
To lay him open from thigh to neck. *Selah*.**

**¹⁴ You pierced with his own spears
The head of his throngs.
They stormed in to scatter us;
Their exultation *was* like those
Who devour the oppressed in secret.**

**¹⁵ You trampled on the sea with Your horses,
On the surge of many waters.**